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ABSTRACT

Student attrition in community colleges has high financial costs for the institutions and high psychological costs for both students and instructors. In order to deal with attrition, it is necessary to examine the sort of interventions which motivate students to stay in classes, rather than accepting attrition as an inevitability. A major factor contributing to student retention is teacher effectiveness, which is heightened by good organization, unambiguous objectives, high expectations and positive regard for students, encouragement of participation, and feedback. At Sacramento City College, a split-section approach has been implemented in some introductory courses to deal with student diversity and increase retention. This approach involves the development of adjunct teaching materials by a reading specialist; assessment of student reading abilities in the first class session; dividing students in courses which have been over-enrolled into two groups on the basis of their reading scores; and applying a mastery learning methodology. This method has contributed to a decrease in attrition rates and an increase in reading skills. Other interventions helpful in reducing attrition include student homogeneity in terms of learning skills; concern and intrusiveness by instructors; structured learning environments; modeling successful learning skills; and creative curricular approaches, such as interdisciplinary team teaching. (HB)

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Retention: Locking the Revolving Door

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Retention: Locking the Revolving Door

Since the passage of Proposition 13 in California community colleges have experienced very difficult fiscal waters. Combined with the largest economic recession that this country has faced in fifty years, we in two year colleges are finding it increasingly difficult to stay afloat. In our bailing process the cost of losing students through attrition has suddenly caused our economic oars to shudder. In one California community college it was calculated that when a student drops from a three hour lecture class (between 4th and 11th week) it cost approximately $100 per drop. Attrition alone cost this school 2 1/2 million dollars a year in lost state revenues (Rasor, 1980).

The aforementioned fiscal conditions have in fact made most colleges take new educational inventories. Our revolving doors are indeed very expensive. Those classrooms checkered with vacant seats suddenly look costly. Perhaps there are some educational and instructional locks we ought to be shopping for.

It is also interesting that during our process of fiscal introspection we neglect the psychological losses our institutions inflict. The loss of self-worth that students experience when they drop classes or college. The self-doubt our instructors sense when they observe the diminishing entries in their gradebooks from week one through week eighteen. Yes, attrition also has a psychological price tag.

Throughout most of the literature and discussion on retention an interesting matter of semantics arises. It would appear that most authors

view retention as an outcome; a bottom line, Creamer, Naff, and Akins (1982). It is perhaps in this mind set that the 50% retention figure for California community college courses becomes the benchmark for mediocrity; our self-fulfilling expectation of the student of two-year institutions.

The underpinnings of such thinking are reminiscent of determinism. It is a little like doctors in hospitals predicting death instead of attempting to help a patient. There is no longer room for this complacent stance; besides, we cannot afford it.

The psycholinguist Benjamin Whorf (1940) has proposed that language is a vehicle for our thoughts. How we see things is affected by how we speak. To an English speaking person "rice" is rice, among the Hanunoo' people of the Philippines they have words for ninety-two varieties of rice. We would find it difficult to detect the differences they "see" in rice.

In "seeing" retention as a process the percept begins to change. Our focus is no longer on an outcome, it is on what we are doing in our classrooms.

The studies of Thompson (1969), Brightman (1974), Moutin (1975), Larkin (1977), Matley (1978), Rasor (1980), Friedlander (1981) indicate two similar conclusions. The most frequent reason students leave schools and courses are "personal" e.g. job conflict. However, three-quarters of their explanations for dropping are related to instruction. In other words most of our students left classes because of how they perceived

the course in relation to themselves e.g. too difficult, boring et cetera.

Perhaps community college education ought to borrow a lesson from psychology. Self-actualization as the criterion for optimal psychological well-being evolved because of Abraham Maslow's (1954) discouragement. He became tired of psychology's studying unhealthy people; he changed the question. Maslow wanted to learn what very healthy people were like. If retention is a procedure then what parts of it are working?

It seems that low attrition occurs in learning environments that have certain ingredients. These "ingredients" emanate chiefly from instructors (Sheldon and Hunter, 1980; Rasor, 1980; Roueche, 1980; Barshis, 1979; Ramirez, 1982). The role of the teacher is indeed powerful. The more intrusive teachers are in their instruction and curriculum the more likely we are in locking our revolving door.

Guskey and Easton (1982) in their pilot studies seem to have identified some of the characteristics of very effective community college faculty members. Teachers who had exceptionally high levels of student achievement as well as low attrition rates. Essentially, these instructors were:

1.- Highly organized and had unambiguous objectives and high expectations for their students.

2.- Emphasized the importance of expressing positive regard for their students.

3.- Placed an emphasis on encouraging student participation consistently asking questions to stimulate involvement.

4.- Strongly emphasized the importance of providing students with regular feedback on their learning and rewarding learning successes.

Intrusiveness in instruction and curriculum can be seen in many "model" programs. The H.E.L.P. Project at Sacramento City College, the I.N. Program at Chicago City Colleges, La Puente Project at Chabot Community College all exemplify endeavors that breed achievement and low attrition through a creative curriculum and intrusive instruction. These projects dealt with high risk learners; students with lower level reading, writing, and computational skills. Yet, they have been highly effective.

Classroom interventions for our transfer level curriculum have not been as prominently investigated. What do we know from so called developmental programs that we can incorporate into our higher level courses? Typically, content oriented courses that explore higher level mental processes have higher levels of attrition and student failure.

One such system is being adapted at Sacramento City College. Academic skills preparation that attempts to deal with the heterogeneity of skills level in the traditional community college classroom. A type of intrusion that does not require special programs, budgets, or staffing. In fact, much of its attraction is its parsimony.

The research of Knox (1977) points to the diversity of

ability in classrooms. The consequent challenge that this diversity presents in community colleges is not a stranger in our institutions. In any introductory course it is possible to see an academic range of twelve grade levels. Some students are reading at college level others are at second grade.

To cope with this diversity we have devised a split-sections approach to some introductory courses. The process consists of four steps.

First, by working with a reading specialist in an adjunct teaching situation materials are developed for the content area course. This may be done formally or informally with the reading teacher and discipline specialist.

Second, students are "over enrolled" into one section of the course. Instead of let's say thirty-five students we enroll seventy at registration. During the first class session all students are assessed for reading level, as we have found reading skills to be the key to successful achievement in academic courses.

Third, after assessment (or proof of recent assessment) students are split at the median score. This score has been tenth grade in over two semesters of pilot studies. Students reading above tenth grade are sent to one "split" and those below sent to the other section which has the adjunct materials (step one). Interestingly, we have found that when students know their academic skills ability they are more serious about their learning. In some ways this is similar to

the first steps of Glasser's Reality therapy (1965, 1969) in its impact on the student.

Fourth, in addition to emphasizing Guskey and Easton's (1982) findings in the course of instruction, an orthodox mastery learning methodology is implemented (Bloom 1968). As Bloom advocates, a teacher based/group based instruction promotes high levels of success in mastery learning. It is believed that this intervention can decrease attrition by 25-30% and student achievement (mastery level) for 80-85% of our students (Bloom, 1982).

Very briefly, the mastery learning process breaks learning into smaller units. Each unit has clearly stated behavioral objectives and consequent learning activities. At the completion of the unit students take "formative tests". Concepts that are missed by 2/3 of the class are retaught and students then relearn the individual items they have missed. This feedback-corrective process is vital to promoting mastery and is followed within several days by another "formative test". It should be noted that formative test items are cross indexed to textbook pages and/or class notes for the corrective process. Units are completed when a "summative test" is administered at the end of this feedback-corrective process.

Our studies at Sacramento City College indicate that when students are placed in such a system our attrition rates approach 10-15% as opposed to 50%. Reading levels in our programs average a two-grade level increase per semester. Self-esteem and locus of control scores

improve significantly. And most importantly, students have begun to feel more confident about their skills and ability to succeed in college. These findings are particularly strong in the high intrusion programs such as the H.E.L.P. Project.

It is this authors conclusion that increased student achievement occurs when students begin to feel the power of their control over their learning. Not only is this accomplished by reversing one's academic self-concept but we have found other specific interventions helpful.

1.- Homogeneity of learning skills reduces attrition rates, e.g. Split-Sections Model, or Project H.E.L.P. Sound assessments programs are needed.

2.- Intrusiveness by instructors (Staff) in students learning and failures promotes success. Students appreciate concern especially when its communicated in a caring manner with "positive regard."

3.- Structured learning environments such as the mastery learning system reduce dissonance about learning outcomes. Self-concept is increased through increased student achievement.

4.- Modeling successful learning skills increases the likeliness that students will acquire the desired skills. Learning Counseling is one such approach we have found successful (Garfield and Scott, 1973).

5.- Creative curriculum such as interdisciplinary team-teaching creates a powerful classroom tool. The inter-relationship

of course content unifies our message, reinforces learning, and heightens student interest.

In conclusion, it would seem that there really are some significant findings in community college education. Student diversity, low academic skills, poor motivation and low self-concept do not have to accelerate our "revolving door." The expense, both psychologically and financially, is no longer affordable.

There are locks we can place on this costly turnstile. We need not reinvent the wheel to find them. but only look around for some of the important things that we already know will work. The process of retention contains many personal, psychological, and profitable solutions.

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